

The Change from the suffix
th to s, in the Third Person.
Present Tense of the verb:
A Problem in the History of
English Language

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- A PROBLEM IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE -

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The Change from the Suffix th to s, in the
Third Person, Present Tense of the Verb.
- A Problem in the History of English Language. -

The suffix th, of the third person, present tense of the verb had begun, as early as the eleventh century, to be softened to s.¹ The transition was gradual, proceeding more rapidly in some parts of England than in others. At the present time the English may be said to have the form s in common use, and the archaic form th, still used occasionally in poetry.

The change from th to s may be followed by examining the prose and poetry, written in different periods, in the different parts of England. The two departments - prose and poetry, should for this purpose, be studied separately. Ten pages was the amount considered in the case of each author examined. The prose writers were considered first.

Leonard Cox, a Cambridge man, prose writer of Central England, whose chief work - "Art and Craft of Rhetoric", appeared 1524, had in ten pages - thirty cases of the suffix th in the third person, present tense of the verb. Miles Coverdale, a Cambridge man, of Northern England - "Prologue to Translation of the Bible",

1523 - twenty-two cases th. Nicholas Udall, an Oxford man of Southern England - "Ralph Roister Doister", 1536 - eighteen cases th. Thomas Cranmer of Central England - "Use of Holy Scriptures", 1540 - thirty-eight cases th. Roger Ascham, a Cambridge Professor, from Northern England in "Toxophilus", 1544, had twenty-six cases th and three cases of s. - "a place that entreats", "my head aches", and "every evil proves".²

John Bale, Cambridge, of Central England, had in his "Death of Sir John Old Castell", 1544 - twenty cases th in this connection. Sir J. Cheke, Cambridge, of Central England, used in his "The Lessons of Sedition", 1549 - fourteen cases th. Hugh Latimer, Cambridge, of Central England, in his "Sermon on the Ploughers", 1549 - forty cases th; and in his "First Sermon" - twenty cases th - in each case ten pages being the amount considered.

Thomas Wilson, Cambridge, of Central England in a "Lesson in Tactics", "The Virtue of Simplicity", "The Use of Wit", "The Rules of Art", "Intolerance of Rome", and in "The Teaching of Poets" - 1553, ten pages, had nine cases of the suffix th and one case of s - "that smells".³ John Knox, University of St. Andrews, of Scotland in "The First Blast of the Trumpet", 1558 - twenty cases th.

Roger Ascham in the "School-master", 1570, used the suffix th in ten cases, no cases of s. George Gascoigne, Cambridge, of Northern England, in "Notes on Instruction Concerning the Making of Verse", 1575 - sixteen cases th. Ralph Holinshed, Chronicler of Northern England in "Chronicle", 1577 - ten pages, had four cases th.

John Lyly, dramatist of Southern England, educated at Oxford, in his "Euphues, The Anatomy of Wit", 1579 - twenty-three cases th and one case of s - standes.⁴ Thomas Lodge, an Oxford man of Southern England, in "Defense of Stage Plays", 1579 - forty-one cases of th and eight of s - shames, needes, runnes, preferres, pacifies, bequeathes, condemnes, and leaves.⁵ Anthony Munday, playwright of Southern England, in "Captivity of John Fox of Woodbridge", 1579, -had five cases of th and one case of s - heedes.⁶

John Lyly, Oxford, Southern England, in "Euphues and his England", 1580 - twenty-five cases th and one of s - rules.⁷ Captain R. Hitchcock of Southern England - "A Politic Plat for the Honour of the Prince, the Great Profit of the Public State, Relief of the Poor, Preservation of the Rich, etc.," - 1580 - twelve cases th.

John Udall, Cambridge, of Southern England in "Demonstration of Discipline", 1588, a religious prose document - twelve cases th to two of s.⁸ Sir Philip Sidney, Oxford, of Southern England, in "Arcadia", 1590- had six cases of s to three of th.⁹ Captain R. Hitchcock in "The English Army. Rations in the Time of Queen Elizabeth", 1591, had seven cases of th and none of s. Robert Green, a pamphleteer and dramatist, Cambridge, of Central England, in "A Groat's Worth of Wit", 1592 - six cases of s to two of th.¹⁰

The first poet considered was Sir Thomas More of Southern England, educated at Oxford, whose "Utopia", appeared, 1516, with thirteen cases of th to the ten pages examined. John Skelton of Central England, Oxford and Cambridge - "Goodly Garland of Laurel", 1523 - ten cases th. John Heywood, poet of South Central England, Oxford - "Play between the Pardoner and the Friar", 1533- twenty-one cases th. Nicholas Udall of Southern England, Oxford, in "English Verses and Ditties at the Coronation Procession of Queen Anne Boleyn", 1533 - ten cases th; and in "Ralph Roister Doister", 1536 - eighteen cases th.

Sir David Lindsay, a Scotch poet, in "First Book of the Monarche", 1546 - two cases th. He used many

Latin verbs. Thomas Sackville of Southern England, Oxford and Cambridge, in "Gordobuc", 1561 - fifteen cases th and seven of s.¹¹ Barnabe Googe, Central England, Oxford, in "Eclogues, Epistles and Sonnets", 1563 - ten cases th and fourteen cases s.¹²

R. Edwards, an Oxford man of Southern England in "Damon and Pythias", 1565 - ten cases th and five of s.¹³ George Gascoigne, a Cambridge man of Northern England, in "Jocasta", 1566 - sixteen cases th and twenty-three of s.¹⁴ Thomas Sackville, Oxford, Southern England, in the "Tragedy of Ferrex and Porrex", 1571 - nine cases th and nine cases s.¹⁵ George Gascoigne in "Hundred Sundry Flowers", 1572 - seventeen cases th and twenty-six of s.¹⁶

Thomas Tusser of Southern England, Cambridge, in "Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry", 1573 - five cases th and five of s.¹⁷ George Gascoigne in "Steel Glas", a satire, 1575 used eight cases of th to seven of s.¹⁸ Edmund Spenser, Oxford, Southern England, in "Shepherd's Calendar", 1579 - ten cases th to nine of s.¹⁹ Thomas Churchyard, Southern England, Oxford, in "The Worthies of Wales", 1587 - six cases th to twenty-five of s.²⁰

Christopher Marlowe, Cambridge, dramatist of Southern England - "Doctor Faustus", 1587 - four cases th to eighteen of s.²¹ Thomas Kyd, dramatist of Southern

England in "Hieronimo ", 1588 - three cases th to twenty-three of s.²² Edmund Spenser, Oxford, of Southern England, in "Faery Queen", 1590 - sixteen cases th to twenty-seven of s.²³ Sir Philip Sidney, Oxford, poet of Southern England in "Astrophel and Stella", 1591 - two cases th to twenty-four of s.²⁴

William Shakspeare of Central England in "Venus and Adonis", 1593 - ten cases th to twenty-seven of s,²⁵ and in "Lucrece", 1594 - five cases th to fourteen of s.²⁶ Michael Drayton, a poet of Central England in "Ideas Mirror", 1594 - five cases th to sixteen of s.²⁷

In the case of the transition from th to s in prose, a writer from Northern England - Roger Ascham, 1544, seems to have taken the lead in breaking away from the original verbal suffix th. The suffix s did not appear again in prose for nine years, in the writings of Thomas Wilson, of Central England, and here only sparingly.

The next suffix s appeared in the prose of John Lyly, of Southern England, twenty-six years later; in that of Thomas Lodge and of Anthony Munday, also of Southern England, in the same year. The use of the verbal suffix s is a little later found in the case of the prose writers of Southern England and still later in the case of writers of Central England.

The change seems to have started in the North, and to have proceeded through Central England to the South where it remained for some time, finally increasing in proportion to the decrease of th in Central England. The earlier employers in prose of the suffix s in the third person, present tense of the verb, were from Cambridge University, in Central England, while most of the writers who employed s a little later were from Oxford University in South Central England. Those using s still later were mostly from Cambridge. The question of the transition can hardly be said to have been influenced by one University, more than by the other.

The transition in the case of poetry was still less decisive. The first poet of those considered who employed the verbal suffix s was Thomas Sackville of Southern England, 1561. The substitution proceeded rapidly through Central England and to Northern England within five years - in the poetry of George Gascoigne, 1566. For many years following, the two verbal suffixes continued in almost equal use in Northern and Southern England, until finally the poets of Southern England employed the verbal suffix s in more cases than th. This use spread through Central England until in Michael

Drayton's poetry, 1594 - there were five cases th to sixteen of s.

The use of the suffix s first exceeds that of th in the writings of Barnabe Googe, an Oxford man of Central England, while the next poets who showed a decided increase were Cambridge men. In later years Oxford men again came to the front in the use of the suffix s.

The study of the transition of verbal suffixes in poetry is less satisfactory than that of prose because the employment of th covered a much longer period in poetry - in fact th has never completely died out in the case of poetry.

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